

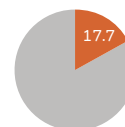
## “ Country recommendation

Croatia should secure an adequate range of locally based services to prevent child poverty and exclusion, while including civil society organisations and children’s opinions into EU funds implementation and national policy.

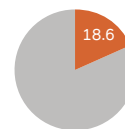
## Country Profile 2022



# Croatia



**Child Population:**  
**691,849**  
(17.1% of total population)



**Child Poverty Rate:**  
**18.6% (2021) ▼\***

\* [lower compared to pre-covid rates in 2019](#)

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) representing

Association Children First (Children First)

[Society “Our Children” Opatija \(SOC Opatija\)](#)

[SOS Children’s Villages \(SOS CV\)](#)

## European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's *European Semester Country Report for Croatia* broadly addresses some of the needs at national level, namely early childhood education and care, education, and child poverty. However, it does not address children in alternative care, children's right to be heard, children with a migrant background, access to mental health support, and children's digital rights. Especially worrisome is the invisibility of children's mental health and well-being, since there is overwhelming evidence that the incidence of mental difficulties is increasing, especially in the population under 18.

Overall, the report failed to include a focus on the situation of

children, together with targeted investments. For instance, the two unique reforms addressing children's needs in the country were tied to the [National Recovery and Resilience Plan \(NRRP\)](#).

Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) highlights the need to put in place **deinstitutionalisation measures, absent in the country report**. As a trend of increased institutionalisation of children becomes noticeable in Croatia, the transition towards stronger community and family-based care should become a priority in public policy. However, there are asymmetries in data and data collection systems.

According to the Ombudsman for Children, the number of children in residential facilities without parental care and community centres mounted to 619, although this number varies depending on the source.<sup>1</sup>

According to [Eurochild DataCare project](#), 3,620 children were placed in alternative care in 2021, of which 921 were in residential care.

Even though there is a link to poverty reduction efforts through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, there is no mention of **children impacted by the pandemic** and the inequalities this may have exacerbated.

CAC felt **early childhood education and care** was rightfully included, with a measure targeting its model of financing. Moreover, some relevant measures are planned for **education** beyond early years, including addressing the low participation of **Roma children in formal education**. CAC acknowledges the deliverables under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan for 2022, but demands more attention be paid to this subject.

They also saw as promising the inclusion of a second reform to

reduce poverty and the increase in the **integration of vulnerable groups by developing family and community-based services**.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

Overall, the *Country Specific Recommendations for Croatia* broadly correspond to the reform needs in Croatia. The Country Specific Recommendations are framed around developing family and community-based services, improving the quality of education, and tackling territorial fragmentation. **However, they do not integrate a rights-based approach**. In fact, children's rights are broadly connected to some of the recommendations, but are not clearly embedded. Broadly, the recommendations for Croatia mostly refer to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. While the implementation of the NRRP can indirectly improve the situation of children, the CSRs do not target the situation of children specifically.

1 Ombudsman for Children Croatia, [Work report 2021](#), 2021.

CAC highlights the **need to prioritise children through Country Specific Recommendation number 2**, which refers to the implementation of the NRRP and 2021-2027 cohesion policy programming.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, improving the quality of education and increasing its market relevance should be prioritised to ensure equal opportunities for all children. While these recommendations are welcomed, European Social Fund Plus funding should further prioritise resolving the challenges connected to the situation of children in Croatia, especially the vulnerable groups of children mentioned above. In this context, the national Council of Children could ensure child poverty and children's rights are addressed in Croatia, through collaborative activities.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Croatia

Croatia has a total child population of 691,849, 18.6% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021. According to Coordination of Associations for Children, the children most in need in Croatia are children in need of psychosocial support (for example, those suffering from any form of violence and with a migrant background), children with disabilities, and children in non-family-based care.

These children need to have access to a broad range of social services in their local communities, including financial support, early intervention services, health services, education tailored to their needs, adequate housing, and psycho-social support for children

who are at risk of separation and their parents.

A good example of interventions that can contribute to the mitigation of child poverty rates and respond to these needs is the project *Loving home for every child*. This project was implemented in Sisacko-Moslavacka, one of the poorest counties in Croatia, and it consisted of the provision of counselling and parental training to parents, foster parents, and guardians to increase their parental and pedagogical skills.

CAC calls on the Croatian government to:

- broaden and further develop a range of integrated social services for children and families at regional level;
- develop non-institutional forms of care and work on the expansion of foster care;
- develop a child-oriented justice system;

- ensure support for parents, both in terms of material aid and counselling.

## European Child Guarantee

### Croatia National Action Plan

The *Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee* asked Member States to submit a National Action Plan (NAP) that would outline how the Child Guarantee would be implemented at national level by 15 March 2022. These Action Plans should outline the children most in need, the planned and existing policy actions, and measures to support them and a monitoring and evaluation framework. The plans should also be drafted in consultation with children, civil society, and national authorities.

The *National Action Plan of Croatia* was published in August 2022. Only one Croatian organisation, Children First,

<sup>2</sup> 2022 Country Specific Recommendations for Croatia, p. 9.

also a member of Coordination of Associations for Children, was involved in the drafting of the NAP through a working group representing the whole civil society sector. Overall, the process of stakeholder engagement was not sufficiently visible to the public or to interested stakeholders. According to Eurochild members, it allowed them to gain insight into the NAP content and development process but with a very low possibility to impact the plans. Indeed, the **process was not transparent** and the information provided by such organisations involved has not transcended.

If involved, SOS Children's Villages (SOS CV) would have shared their direct experience in working with children from alternative care, and children and families at risk of separation. SOC Opatija would have **recommended ensuring active child participation on a national level**.

According to the NAP, children were involved in the drafting of the NAP through an online survey for

young people (16-25 years old), group discussions (12-25 years old), and a forum organised by the Ombudsperson for Children. However, our members have no further information about their involvement.

The NAP rightfully recognises the need for a more comprehensive, targeted, and integrated strategic approach to target groups of children. CAC highlighted that while the **six general objectives described in the NAP are relevant to the needs of children in Croatia**, more is needed.

Regarding **early childhood education and care (ECEC)**, it is very important that the NAP addresses the territorial fragmentation and weak fiscal capacities of certain environments and regional instances. **Access to healthcare and quality nutrition** for children at risk of poverty features as a priority in the NAP, along with an accent on a strategic framework for the protection of children's **mental health**. However, there should be more concrete measures for

the prevention of all forms of violence against children, which have increased lately due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other phenomena.

Finally, the NAP duly addresses the needs of **children leaving care**, through objectives related to housing (ensure allowance for up to 1 year leaving care) and social services (expand the network of foster care services and social support services for children leaving care). However, it has some gaps concerning financial support to grassroots NGOs, **failing to include actions on child participation, children from minorities, and children with disabilities**.

The members expressed some **concerns regarding the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the NAP, especially related to measuring outputs and efficacy of public policies in Croatia**. The NAP does not provide specific indicators or benchmarks for the measures outlined. Without a solid monitoring system, which

is a long-standing problem in public policy in the country, effective delivery will be difficult to ensure. CAC proposes enhancing stakeholder engagement, including children through the National Council of Children, in the monitoring of the plan to ensure the effective implementation of the actions planned. According to the NAP, children will be consulted bi-annually on its progress.

## EU Funding

### Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of European funds available in Croatia for actions that invest in children. At national level, information on this can be found on [www.esf.hr](http://www.esf.hr). Coordination of Associations for Children is aware of EU funding that can be used at national, regional, and local levels to invest in children.

One of the main principles of ESF+ regulation is social dialogue and civil society engagement. However, there has been **almost**

**no stakeholder involvement in the drafting process of the Partnership Agreement (PA)**, which sets out the main guidelines to implement EU funds at national level. There were a few selected CSO representatives included in the working group for the planning of the ESF+, according to official sources, but the names of these representatives are not public. The draft of the PA was published for comment in July 2022, only for 15 days and in a period of low activity (summer), with the justification that the draft was extremely late. Therefore, **civil society's opinion was virtually left out of the programming of such funds.**

### Projects funded by the EU in Croatia

On 28 January 2021, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament reached an agreement that compels Croatia to allocate an 'appropriate'

amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty. Although the Partnership Agreement has not yet been approved, it is foreseen that 5% of ESF+ will be allocated to tackling child poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Our members have a long tradition of being involved in EU-funded projects, especially at local and community levels, and of actively sharing examples of good practice. SOC Opatija has been involved in an EU-funded project that consisted of strengthening the local community for better children's participation. The project 'Let's start the wheel of our community' was carried out with the city of Opatija.

CAC calls on **the Croatian government to use ESF+ to prioritise investment in the priority areas** outlined in the previous section, namely deinstitutionalisation, integrated

social services, child-oriented justice systems, education, and child participation.



<sup>3</sup> Kennedy A., *Child Guarantee National Action Plans – Targets, EU funding and governance*, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2022.